Book review: No caption needed: iconic photographs, public culture and democracy

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Book reviews

Robert Hariman and John Luis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Democracy*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2007. 419 pp. ISBN-13 9780226316062, ISBN-10 0226316068 (hbk) $30.00

Cultural studies has had a rather strained relationship with photography, one overwhelmingly governed by suspicion. The idea of the photograph as essentially deceptive, routinely duping people in various politically negative ways, has been paramount. Denunciations of the apparent 'innocence' of the image have appeared in critical writings with a remarkable degree of repetition, as if, without them, scholars and students were always in danger of slipping back into believing in transparency (not just having their 'transparent moments' with a given image). For sure, any social analysis of photography has to recognize its long and continuing history of condensing and 'naturalizing' meanings to strategic purpose. However, its aesthetic and cognitive force, its constitutive impact upon social imagination, needs broader terms of address. How might photography contribute to our understanding of the world and to constructive critical alignments with it emotionally? How much do our regular enchantment by it (an enchantment whose recognition in Barthes' writings is part of their continuing value) and our routine uses of it deserve more by way of scholarly attention than yet another attack on 'transparency' can by itself provide?

The authors of this welcome new monograph try to open up a broader debate about how photographs are put to work and re-worked within public discursive space. They proceed by the simple but quite bold move of taking nine famous photographs, each one having a well-documented cultural 'moment' and a continuing symbolic legacy, and examining the key interconnections of their history as powerful nodes of value and feeling.

The nine famous images, in the sequence they are discussed in the book, are the Migrant Mother (1936), The Times Square sailor kissing a girl on VJ day (1945), The Iwo Jima flag raising (1945), the New York firemen raising the flag at Ground Zero (2001), the kneeling female figure with outstretched arms alongside a body on the ground at the Kent State University shootings (1970), the screaming child victims of 'accidental napalm'

running down the road in Vietnam (1972), the lone man in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square (1989), and the explosions of the *Hindenburg* airship (1936) and the *Challenge*r space shuttle (1986). I have used my own descriptions above rather than the most frequently published titles in order to provide a stronger cue to memory, aware also of the way that the titles of many of these images were subject to change in different contexts at different times.

Each of the images, together spanning 65 years, has a considerable literature of commentary and debate surrounding it already, of course. The challenge for Hariman and Lucaites is therefore to pull things together around the 'public culture' idea. The approach is essentially to mix a close history of production, circulation, use and comment with their own detailed readings. These draw on the strong 'art history' tradition of aesthetic engagement with photography as well as locating the images as forms of public document and devices of civic memory, compressing celebration, desire and anxiety (sometimes in the same image).

Not surprisingly, the nine pictures open up different kinds of political space, working with a range of formal and connotative recipes in often quite distinctive contexts. They gender the public, the nation and geo-political locations variously, relating to contemporary flows of power and authority at diverse angles. Most of them have a conflicted dynamics both of revelation and concealment, just as they often have both positive and negative energies at work in the way they connect with interpretative possibility, the senses and the feelings that come from looking at them. The authors remark how, quite frequently, they achieve their iconicity because of the way their apparent formal simplicity connects with deep cultural contradictions. They note how 'patterns of moral intelligence' can be articulated by images in a manner that can 'disrupt conventional discourses of institutional legitimacy' (p. 194) even where such disruption is categorically not intended by those who take them and publish them.

At many points, the slippery 'magic' of photography as a medium comes through strongly, in ways that refresh our sense of its complexity and its semiotic volatility when combined with captions and printed contexts. The study of the Iwo Jima flag raising on Mount Suribachi notes the way in which initially the picture was treated with suspicion by many newspaper editors, who were worried about it being 'staged' (and, more importantly, appearing to be so). In fact, evidence firmly suggests that it was taken from spontaneous action, as a 'lucky shot'. However (as the book *Flags of My Fathers* and now Clint Eastwood's film of the event make clear), the celebrated image was in fact of a second flag raising, following the raising of a first (rather smaller) flag some two hours earlier, which was then taken down to be kept as a trophy. A photograph exists of the first flag with marines around it (easily available through web search engines) but its stronger authenticity, documenting 'the real moment of conquest',

is no match for the formal elegance and temporal force carried by the image of its replacement *going up*.

Where is the use of images in public culture headed, particularly given the radical transformation in availability and circulation brought about by the web? The authors see positive signs of a fracturing of institutionally managed iconicity by the newer 'circuits of appropriation' that the web allows. However, they note how 'public spectatorship is exercised primarily through the experience of looking at images of a public world of actors, actions and events' (p. 299) and they carry their sense of the eloquence and indispensability of photographs as public documents through to their final discussion of the 'visual public sphere'. Here, some work with how their selected images are currently perceived in the classroom and among different groups of Americans might have been a wonderful, if necessarily impressionistic and refracted, complement to their own careful, historical readings. They might have also said more about the relationships with television, still the dominant public medium and with a steady supply of pictures and sounds that contrast interestingly, both in their aesthetics and in their political profile, with the still and mute images of photography. They are mostly more hopeful than convincing about how the 'liberal' dimension of contemporary political culture – individualizing, consumer-oriented and often resistant to the kind of appeal to community that many of the photographs they discuss exerted when first published – might be reconnected back with 'democratic' public values.

But this is an admirable study. Among other things, it might prompt more academic interest in the current politics of photography internationally. What kinds of 'iconicity' do we see at work now? To what purposes are they being put? To pick up on the book's own concluding discussion: How important is the production and circulation of static images for democratic political development today?

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Sherrie A. Inness, *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender and Class at the Dinner Table*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 246 pp. ISBN 1403970084 (hbk) $45.00

Secret Ingredients contributes to a growing body of work that demonstrates how cookbooks are not simply guides about how to cook, but also how to live. As such, cookbooks offer valuable resources for researching hidden cultural, as well as culinary, histories. In this book, Inness aims to provide a corrective to the scholarship on cookbooks which focuses on how these works play a role in reproducing gender inequalities. Indeed, she admits that the book also provides a corrective to some of her own earlier work